

Lucky to Be Born an Asian American

By Tiffany Lam

As C. Wright Mills had said, knowing and discovering your life and its intersection with history is “in many ways a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one,” and it is distinctly true for my life and my history. I realize now that I am a self-centered know-it-all that acts as though the world revolves around me. Before this assignment I did not know the histories of my parents and how they came to be here in the US. I did not care to know. I did not want to know the hardships of immigrating to a whole new country, not speaking the language, and not having anything to your name. I had to ask my parents after being assigned the task of writing this paper, and I found that they were more than excited to share their stories with me.

My mom’s family lived in Saigon, Vietnam where they lived a life full of riches. My maternal grandfather (1913-1972) was a hard worker who moved from China to Cambodia to Vietnam to develop his business. He grew up in poor conditions but was able to provide his family with everything they wanted. He first married “first grandmother” (1915-1947) but she died during childbirth. Together they had three children. The saddest part that I have learned about my family is that after the child was born, my grandfather did not feel that he was capable of taking care of another child. Also, this child would always be a painful reminder of who he had lost. So he gave up this child for adoption. Somewhere out there in this world, I have a half-aunt that I hope is doing well. When “first grandmother” passed away, her younger sister was asked to marry grandfather to ensure that his first children and her nieces and nephews would be

taken care of and not neglected by a stranger, had he remarried another. She was only 18 years old when she moved from China to Vietnam to marry her sister's husband.

My mother is the third child and second daughter of my grandfather and my grandmother. She was born in 1952 and grew up in Vietnam with a comfortable lifestyle. The family lived in four story house, with her oldest half-brother living with his immediate family in the house adjacent to theirs. They had servants to help them with any whim they had. She went to a private school where she was taught Vietnamese and Chinese. My mom lived a happy and simple existence; until the Vietnam War took place, and in 1975 their family was forced to flee the country. She left the country at the age of 23.

Together with the family, my mother climbed aboard a boat and left everything that was their lives behind. All they had with them were the little precious jewelry that they could manage to find and the few pictures that would represent their lives in Vietnam. They left a wealthy life for the unknown. While on the boat, they had meager meals and my grandmother had to sell her jewelry so that she could buy meat for her children to eat. The boat took them to Hong Kong where they lived as refugees for about two years. Here they slept in bunks that were four tiers high and with the thoughts of where they would end up.

My father and his family also lived in Vietnam. He was born in 1953 in Saigon, Vietnam. My paternal grandfather and grandmother had eleven children together. My dad was the sixth child, and the third son. My dad's family was not as well off as that of

my mom's. They lived a modest life in Vietnam. Their family also fled Vietnam on a boat during the Vietnam and headed to Malaysia. There they lived two years in a refugee camp, hopefully waiting for news about a country accepting them as immigrants.

It was due to the 1965 Immigration Act that allowed for my mom's and dad's family to enter the United States. It was difficult for my mom to transition into a new country and new language, for she had grown up to and was accustomed to the way of living in Vietnam. Once she arrived in the United States, she was bewildered with this whole new world. Here both my parents had to learn to speak English and both began to take classes at Rancho Santiago in Santa Ana, California. Here is where my parents met and began their courtship. They were married on December 24, 1982. I was born on May 19, 1984. After having me, my parents decided not to have anymore children because they were worried that there would be no one to take care of me, let alone another child.

So, that is how I came to exist in this world. It was due to the Vietnam War and with the help of the 1965 Immigration Act that I was born an Asian American. I am sad to admit that I don't know much about the history of my dad's family. I had only learned about the history of my mom's family because I was brought up by my maternal grandmother and she would tell me stories here and there. Like most Asian parents, my dad had a difficult time communicating with me, because I am a girl. I believe that he feels he does not have many things to talk to me about, so I know relatively little about him. I only hope that as I grow up that I will make a harder effort to talk to him and get to know him before he is gone.

In considering the quote that knowing and discovering your life and its intersection with history is “in many ways a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one,” it definitely makes me reevaluate who I am today. After learning about how my parents came to be in the United States I went through a series of emotions. I am sad that they had to go through such hardships to get here. I appreciate them more by understanding how hard they had to work to learn a new language and learn new skills to acquire a job. I feel very lucky that I was born here and had such an abundance of opportunity for me to receive an education and be able to attend UCLA today. I know that there is much more to be learned about the histories of both my mom’s and dad’s families and I will make a concerted effort to learn more, before it is too late.